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CIA helped Chile recruit Cuban killers

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By JOE TRENTO

WASHINGTON — A hit team of Cuban terrorists, involved in at least a dozen murders since 1974, was recruited with Central Intelligence Agency help for the secret police of South Africa and Chile, a Sunday News Journal investigation has discovered.

The victims include Chilean exile leader Orlando Letelier and a high-ranking South African official who uncovered a major government scandal.

South Africa's Bureau for State Security (BOSS) and its Chilean counterpart, called DINA, began hiring CIA-trained anti-Castro fanatics in 1973 to carry out contract killings.

Sunday News Journal reporters followed a chain of evidence that included weapons, gold coins and passports and other documents that linked the contract hit team with South Africa's and Chile's secret police.

The News Journal investigation included interviews with secret government witnesses now in hiding under false identities, with current and former South African and Chilean intelligence agents and with present and former officials of the CIA, the Justice and State Departments.

These sources say the CIA helped form the hit team by arranging introductions for operatives of BOSS and DINA to leaders of the Cuban nationalist movement in Miami and Union City, N.J. In return, DINA killed at least 17 agents of the Cuban Intelligence Service and BOSS provided information about Communist activities in Africa.

FBI and Justice Department officials say the CIA did not inform them that Cuban Nationalists were receiving arms, money or false passports even after the hit team killed Chilean exile Letelier and an American in a 1976 Washington, D.C., car bombing.

The FBI has been hunting two Cuban Nationalists for the Washington assassinations and is looking into how their flight was financed and how they are linked to Omega-7 and ZERO, two Cuban Nationalist Movement groups claiming credit for a number of terrorist acts, including one of the assassination attempts.

Justice Department and FBI officials say privately they are incensed by the lack of cooperation from the CIA in the continuing probe of terrorism and in the search for the missing Letelier murder suspects.

"We have professional killers, trained by one of our own government agencies, on the loose," said one FBI agent familiar with the case.

The known victims of the hit team include: Former Chilean Gen. Carlos Prats and his wife, Cora, killed in an October 1974 bombing in Buenos Aires; Chilean Minister of Defense Oscar Bonillo, blown up with five other people in a helicopter in Chile in March 1975; Ronni Kapen Moffit and Orlando Letelier, who died in the September 1976 Washington car bombing; and South Afr

were shot to death in Africa home in November.

Another couple, Chile leader Bernardo Leight wife Ana, were seriously an unsuccessful assassination attempt in Rome in October.

The South African government that controlled BOSS is in power, and the new government is trying to solve the Smits case. The new government's spokesman in New York, Michael Spencer, said "It is politically imperative for the country to solve this case."

Louis Le Gerange, South African minister of police, said his investigation has expanded to other parts of the world because it "may be part of an international plot." Le Gerange said last week that he has two South African agents in London exploring a possible national connection.

Spencer told the Sunday News Journal that BOSS "had a reciprocal relationship with DINA and would exchange favors." Spencer said BOSS was disbanded last year and reorganized as a less powerful National Intelligence Service.

"I can only tell you that many of the former BOSS officials have gone underground. The murder of the Smits has not been solved. Our government has no idea of who did it," Spencer said.

CIA spokesman Dale Peterson said that he could not discuss details of the relationship between the CIA and other governments. "Sources and methods are something we just can't talk about, and that's what you are getting into."

Juan Prado, press attache at the Chilean embassy in Washington, said he had no information about any links and would not discuss the matter further on the telephone.

Informed by the Sunday News Journal of the hit team's operations, a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, charged with CIA oversight, said last week. "This may have been an attempt by the CIA to get around the prohibition on assassinations. The idea that they turned in intelligence sources who had been on their payroll is outrageous."

The prohibition on assassinations came in a presidential executive order after a 1975 Senate probe revealed CIA involvement in attempts on the lives of foreign leaders.

the Cuban nationals.

These lawyers say that the CIA was not required to give them any information not directly related to the Letelier bombing.

Ricardo Canete, a protected witness in the Letelier bombing, told the Sunday News Journal that Virgilio Pablo Paz and Dionisio Suarez, the fugitives wanted in the Letelier killing, had been using CIA-supplied counterfeit money and South African gold Krugerrands to live on while at large.

Testifying under the name of Carlos Casado, Canete gave that information in secret to a grand jury in March 1978, but did not repeat it at the public trial.

The convicted Cubans defended themselves by claiming that the Letelier-Moffit killings were a CIA operation from the beginning. The Justice Department has insisted the murders were plotted by agents of the Chilean government.

The CIA started working closely in 1960 with anti-Castro Cubans, training them in Miami and Guatemala before the Bay of Pigs invasion. The CIA also played a large role in the overthrow of the Marxist Allende government in Chile in 1973.

FBI and Justice Department sources said the relationship between the CIA, DINA and the Cubans explains why the CIA was reluctant to help track down Paz and Suarez, the two Cubans who remain at large.

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